

The Metaphor and Matrix of Mysticism in the Verse of Guru Nanak and Fernando Pessoa:



A Comparative Overview by Neeti Singh

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Two significant poets from two distinct mystic traditions pitched across the planet and time, are discussed here. One is Guru Nanak the Punjabi saint-poet located in 15th century India and the other is Fernando Pessoa from early 20th century Portugal. The essay thus explores through Guru Nanak, the dynamics of Nirguna Bhakti and Sufism in the medieval Indian context; and examines the dynamics of Gnosticism and Paganism through the fabric of Fernando Pessoa's work. Nature as metaphor and matrix for spiritual transcendence makes for common ground between the two poets who essentially were mystics and modernist rebels. In their own ways, both come across as ambassadors of peace – as nature poets who resisted orthodoxy and hierarchy in religion, and opposed pointless ritual and conservative norm. While Nanak was a popular saint and an integrated family man, Pessoa remained all his life a confirmed bachelor, a reclusive mystic and a chronic drinker conceptually opposed to the idea of sainthood.

The two poets, Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), hail from two different continents, religious contexts, cultures and time periods. However, they

were both mystic poets who drew inspiration from Nature and the ancient spiritual systems of the world – the Greek and the Indian. They both lived unconventional lives according to the contexts in which they were placed, and both wrote verses that were seeped in sublime and symbolist representations of Nature. Also their work was modern in ethos as it was an expression of their extraordinary lives - harnessed and dyed by the history and indigenous mystic traditions of their times. While Guru Nanak in 15th century India, was a leading mystic who wrote poetry and was located at the helm of a new line of *Nirguna-Bhakti*¹ saint-poets; Pessoa was a reclusive postmodernist genius. He wrote and lived in Portugal of the early 19th century, led a life of a deconstructionist and was much ahead of his times. While Nanak was a householder, a legendary traveller and drew a huge following, Pessoa was a writer who courted anonymity, he neither married nor travelled except in poetic imagination through the adventures of his alter egos – the heteronyms². With three centuries, two different continents and an ocean to set the poets apart - besides the obvious difference in language, history, culture and socio-political contexts - what can then possibly yoke these two great poets here in this comparative, academic enterprise? The fact is that they both were poets who wrote from/ for the margins. They both perceived Nature as transcendental, sublime and as cosmic principle, and both turn to Nature for succor, guidance and peace. This approach manifests in the sympathetic fabric and energy of their writing and in the structures that inform it, namely the ancient pagan and mystic traditions of the Orient and the Hellenic.

This paper yokes through two significant poets, the traditions and histories of Eastern and Western religions and metaphysics. It reads through their poetry, the dynamics of their mystic involvement, growth, semiotic and poetic strategy. The dynamics of Nirguna Bhakti and Sufism in the medieval Indian context is explored through the compositions of Guru Nanak. The resurgence of Gnosticism and Paganism at the threshold of the 20th century is explored through the trajectory of Fernando Pessoa's work.

Nature in both their writings becomes a symbolic portal, an extended metaphor and matrix for spiritual expression and transcendence. Nature and mysticism make for common ground between the two poets who were essentially iconoclastic, modernist, and located in the space of the subaltern. In their own ways, both resisted orthodox hierarchical religion, and conservative social norms. While Nanak was a popular saint and an integrated family man who earned much recognition and regard as a saint, poet and leader; Pessoa was overly self conscious, reclusive and a chronic bachelor who in all probability met a virgin death. A brilliant intellectual product of the early modern period, Pessoa was a mystic who lived in denial, beleaguered all through by a life mired by heavy loneliness and chronic drinking, it was the life of a saint conceptually opposed to the status of sainthood. The basic difference between the two mystic poets is as follows: Pessoa writes from the labyrinths of deep mystic wisdom and an unresolved struggle, while Nanak writes from the premise of one who has stilled the mind and is reaping the rewards of an inner harvest which from time to time he tries to share with those around him.

I

Guru Nanak (1469-1539)

According to popular belief Guru Nanak was born in April 1469 AD. His father Kalyan Chand Das Bedi, was a Bedi Khatri by caste who lived in the village of Rai Bhoi di Talvandi now located in Pakistan. Kalyan Chand was the village patwari/ accountant for crop revenue and his mother's name was Tripta. Both of them were Hindus and belonged to the merchant caste. Nanak had just one sibling, a sister who was five years younger to him and named Bebe Nanki. When she got married to Jai Ram and left for Sultanpur, Guru Nanak who was deeply attached to his sister followed her there and took up employment under Daulat Khan Lodi. Two years later at the age of eighteen he too was married off to Mata Sulakkhani with whom he had two sons, Siri Chand and Lakhmi Das. The elder son Sri Chand was a born mystic. He received enlightenment from his father's teachings and went on to become the founder of the Udasi sect – in contemporary times we know them as the Nanakpanthies¹⁰. Although Guru Nanak lived the regular life of a householder, a major part of his life was spent meditating and travelling to far off lands, sharing the light he had seen, dissipating the darkness, singing, writing hymnals in praise of the divine whose imprint he saw in all that surrounded him. Popular accounts of Guru Nanak's life narrate several incidents that indicate the fact that Nanak from an early age was blessed and marked by divine grace for a sublime destiny.

Notable lore recounts that as a child Nanak astonished his teacher by describing the implicit symbolism of the first letter of the alphabet, which is almost straight stroke in Persian or Arabic, resembling the mathematical version of one, as denoting the unity or oneness of God. Other childhood accounts refer to strange and miraculous events about Nanak, such as one witnessed by Rai Bular, in which the sleeping child's head was shaded from the harsh sunlight, in one account, by the stationary shadow of a tree or, in another, by a venomous cobra. (Simran Saab)

Nanak's world of late 15th century Punjab – located in the north of an 'India' not yet formed, must have been a land of agriculture, bullock carts, no electricity, long distances, forests and palanquins and horses. It was, as history paints it, a land populated by simple folk, oppressed equally by the Brahmins and the proselytising Moghuls. A landscape furnished by simple ritual and ancient esoteric wisdoms, trammelled for centuries by the splendour of Brahminical ritual and Buddhist lore, and in the more recent past, a landscape of severe compromise and chaos harnessed by the plunder and pillage of Islamic invaders. The indigenous traditions of Saguna and Nirguna bhakti, the Sufi silsilaas of Muslim mystics who had followed the invaders, and the wandering Nath yogis – all must have spread God's love, light and some relief as they hobnobbed in the margins with the poor, the low caste and the Dalit by bringing them back to humanity, releasing 'god' from the pyramid of hierarchy and ritual rigidity. On the other hand were also the grand decaying universities, the great bejewelled temples and the grand Buddhist monasteries that tragically fell under the sword wielding terror of the horse backed Moghul and Turk invaders.

Before approaching the verse of Guru Nanak, it is essential to first examine the conceptual dynamics of Indian mysticism through terms like, 'Bhakti', '*Saguna*', '*Nirguna*', and 'Sufi', which define, locate and structure the semiotic of medieval Indian poetics. The term Bhakti can be translated as deep love and devotion – it is an intense personalised way of forging a connection with the divine lord. Bhakti is the devotion of a Bhakta/devotee. It is based on an intense emotional surrendering – an intense, intimate spiritual bond which is expressed through devotional compositions and hymnals (referred to as *kirtana*) which in some cases were accompanied by spiritual trance and dancing. The Bhakti movement emerged from within the Hindu fold as a rebellion against the hierarchical aspect of Hinduism. Its primary structure was a life of simplicity, high morals and divine surrender. The means to God was the path of love which often took the form of following a saint/ sant, yogi/ sage or a sufi, listening to his/ her discourse and participating in a *kirtana* - group singing of hymns composed by the poet-saint - in praise of an incarnate god in the form of Vishnu or Shiva, or in praise of the idea of god who was formless. Mystic schools that centered on an incarnate god-form were known as *Saguna*, while those that approached god as formless divine energy were known as *Nirguna* – without *guna* or physical attribute.

The Bhakti movement per se had begun with *Saguna* bhakti where a mythological heroic god was symbolically reproduced and worshipped as idol, stone, totem, piece of wood, tree etc. In time however, there came a shift in the general schema of Bhakti and

the bhakti as a movement developed a new branch that varied in its perception of god, as one that is formless, without any physical features, and monotheistic. This approach was called Nirguna Bhakti and Nanak along with Kabir were the major proponents. Nirguna Bhakti was also known as the Sant tradition. It evolved as the fallout of many factors – primarily the arrival of Islam, the socio political chaos, their aggressive policy of religious conversion, the loot and plunder that followed and the already Dalit despised in the name of religious sanctity and barriers of caste – all of this must have carved among the marginalised low caste and native poor, a burning need for spiritual succor and god. This need was served by the emergence of the path of *Nirguna* bhakti. Unlike its *Saguna* cousin, *Nirguna* bhakti was totally free of temple/ masjid, totem, idol, religion or rituals. No wonder the chief proponents of *Nirguna* bhakti – Saint Kabir and Guru Nanak – enjoyed a common following of both the Hindus and Muslims. Their poetry is iconoclastic and heavily debunks rigid religious beliefs and practices. It does however continue to draw and rework its metaphors from the Indian common pool of history, religion and religious philosophy, myth, topography, and literature. God according to Nirguna Bhakti was amorphous, monotheistic, transcendent and formless. As Nanak describes him in the *Japji*

There is One Being

Truth its name

Primal Creator

Without fear

Without enmity

Eternal in time

Un-born

Self Exist

The Guru's Grace.

(*GS*, Vol.1, p.1)

Nanak's writings were canonised and subsumed into the *Adi Granth* – also known as the *Guru Granth Saheb* – which is a mega storehouse of mystic verse but is primarily read as a religious text by the Sikhs. To extricate Nanak from the thick labyrinth of religion and engage with his work as poetry is also an aspect of this essay which examines him as a mystic poet alongside Pessoa four centuries away in a distant distinct Portugal.

Nanak's poetic oeuvre³ consists of some long poetic compositions like the *Japji*, *Dakhni Omkar*, *Siddha Goshti*, *Kirtan Sohila* and *Asa-di-Var*. And several short poems – over nine hundred in number which draw inspiration and form from the folklore and indigenous traditions of the people of Punjab. Since his poetry is the focus of this essay I have shifted details of his works to the Notes section at the bottom. The tenor of Nanak's poetry can primarily be summed up within the following terms: German Romanticism and Sublime and Transcendental verse. Speaking in the Indian critical parlance his poetic genius can be compared to the poetic style that one finds in the Rig Veda and the Upanishads. It is incantatory, filled with wonderment, with broad strokes of symbols and imagery drawn from nature and the cosmos and seeped in a sense of

continuous calm as Nanak transcends Nature to find a meditative sublime sense of God – God energy. To quote from the Dakhni Omkar:

The various shapes He weaves,
through wind, water, fire, space,
the One soul wanders
through the three worlds.
Hanging low the ambrosial rain,
incessantly drizzles,
the sublime word alone
can establish the mortal.' (GS, 3036-37)

'The mercurial mind remains not still,
like the deer it nibbles,
secretly upon green shoots of sin.

But he that enshrines thine lotus
feet in his heart lives, eternally.' (GS, 3044) (Tr. Mine)

The formless anthropomorphic god with lotus feet, the image of an ever falling ambrosial rain, and references to the One soul that wanders through the three worlds trace their steps to the semiotics of Saguna Bhakti⁴. While the lotus feet recall an image of Lord Krishna, the ambrosial rain links up with a spiritual state in the matrix of yogic practise and its original proponent Lord Shiva. The state of spiritual ecstasy, the harnessing of the mercurial mind and the enemy within that feeds like a deer, on the green shoots of sin also recalls the Sufi interpretation of the word 'jihad' or 'holy war' as a battle that is internally fought between the vagrant lower self and the higher impulse which leans towards a surrender to God. And the vigour that Nanak brings to the verse with his own organic assembling of it all, along with his unique employment of the deer image that comes towards the end of the poem. The deer that is regarded as a sylvan image of innocence and the delicate denizen of a verdure landscape, when juxtaposed here with the idea of sin, transforms into an agency of darkness and terror, thereby infusing an element of shock and bringing the poetic tenor to an unexpected turn.

Living in the age that he did, Guru Nanak wrote poetry more as a spiritual expression – a celebration of the transcendental sublime which he saw reflected in the universe around him – be it then the starry night sky or a scene from the village fair. Everything and all that he saw around him got transformed into metaphor and material for his poetic enterprise. Nanak wrote verse for the following reasons: i) to celebrate and share his own spiritual journey and divine insights ii) to discuss the nitty-gritty of the mystic trajectory in order to inspire and encourage other travellers on the way, and

iii) to critique and expose the corruption of established religious orders which continued to exploit and manipulate the common people.

Therefore, Baba Nanak's work is not sheer nature poetry, rather it is a poetics that ingenuously metaphorises nature and natural landscape, to paint the inner spiritual state of the mystical experience and onward journey. In the following poem - a morning hymn called "Parbhati" - the five senses become the five thieves held responsible for stealing the mind's composure and peace. The condition of a realised soul seeped in compassion, continence and patience is described through the metaphor of grains, rice and wheat and milk. And the cow-calf symbol used to refer to purity and innocence reminds us of the lamb symbol as used in the poems of Blake and Pessoa. Both are symbolic of the pagan world and both are associated with the image of God as shepherd. While the lamb reminds us of Jesus Christ the calf/ cow is associated with stories of Lord Krishna, the cowherd. The "Parbhati" composed by Guru Nanak, from the *Guru Granth Sahib*:

I ask for but one boon from Thee
Bless thou me, O Lord with thy name.
The five wandering thieves are held,
the mind's self conceit is stilled.
Sinful seeing and evil thoughts flee away.
Such is the Lord's divine knowledge.

Bless thou me with the rice of continence and chastity,
the wheat of compassion and the leafy plate
of thy meditation, O Lord, Bless thou me
With the milk of good deeds
and the clarified butter of contentment,
such are the alms I ask of thee.

Make thou forgiveness and patience my milch-cow,
that my mind's calf may easily in drink the milk.
I ask for the dress of the Lord's praise,
and modesty and this wise Nanak
shall continue uttering the Lord's praise.

(*GS*, Vol 8, p. 4385)

Nanak's poetic control, the sophistication with which he handles language and the subtle employment of suggestion and symbols is apparent in the poem quoted above. One is amazed once again by his extraordinary use of ordinary metaphor. The rice of continence resonates on two levels – one being the chaste whiteness of the grain and two being the plethora of opportunity and temptation in a single lifetime just like the innumerable amount of rice grain contained in a single handful. The 'wheat of compassion' is another brilliant image as it holds with remarkable subtlety a hint of the poor man's hunger and the humility of the one who shares his wheat. The rich

synecdoche of the expression 'leafy plate' cannot be missed either. The 'leafy plate' could be a literal reference to plates made from leaves stitched together, but it could also refer to the canopy of a tree overhead - an extension of the village landscape which in turn alludes to the intimate and wholesome connect between nature/ trees and the mystic dynamic.

A significant feature of Nanak's poetry is his improvisation of the esoteric semiotics of *Saguna* Bhakti and Hatha yoga. For instance in the poem above, the ambrosia of immortality which indicates in Nath terminology the ecstatic opening up of the crown chakra and a great spiritual high, transforms in Nanak's hands to the 'milk' that his 'mind's calf may easily in drink'. Previously that same 'milk' was referred to as the milk of good deeds. The metaphor is further extended to convey that just as clarified butter is obtained from milk, so too is contentment obtained as a result of good karma or deeds. Another refreshing metaphor, which is also a brilliant case of synaesthesia (sense transference), is the poet's supplication for a 'dress of the Lord's praise'. The poet's dress is not of cotton or silk, it alludes in fact to the thoughts we wear like a fabric – an energy field dyed in the hue of patience and modesty. A dress made of thoughts of such humble devotion would help the mystic cancel false pride and ego and help him/ her weave a place in the rain of grace. This sentiment of the poet Nanak resonates with a similar sentiment expressed by Fernando Pessoa in his "Caeiro" poems. Where he says he'd 'rather be the dust of the road/ And trampled on by the feet of the poor... or be the

Miller's donkey/And have him beat me and care for me... than... go through life/ Always looking back and feeling regret.'

Before moving on to Fernando Pessoa, we shall examine yet another short "Parbhati" which showcases the Saint poet's assimilation and improvisation of the Shaiva, Vaishnava and Sufi semiotic - thereby creating within his poetry, a space that was secular, interactive and enriched with his own personal metaphysic, vision and mystic idiom. The poem/ "parbhati" :

When the ray of gnosis spreads across the heart lotus,
it joyfully blossoms
and in the house of the moon enters the sun
attaining unto the Lord, by the guru's grace,
i have overcome death
and nipped my desire in my head.

I am now imbued with the colour deep red
of the Lord's supreme love
and am rid of other hues.

Nanak my tongue is imbued with the relish
of that Lord who is pervading all over.

(GS, Vol 8, p.4395)

The first stanza which is an unbroken sentence with a chain of metaphors (the blossoming heart lotus – the moon entering the house of the sun and the overcoming of death) is an expression from the esoteric science of Hatha yoga. It refers to the poet's deep spiritual awakening – the rise of the awakening *Kundalini* – serpent energy from the base of the spine to the crown chakra – the tenth threshold or as the poet says in Punjabi⁵, the *dasam dwaara* (the crown chakra). The colour red in the next stanza is a reference to the Sufi dervesh⁶ who dresses in robes of deep red – red being the colour of the muladhara – root chakra - is also the colour of life-giving-blood that runs through the veins and is symbolic of the divine father's love and compassion. The poem ends with an erotic union with the Lord. In a brilliant expression of synaesthesia the poet says that he has relished with his tongue, the taste of the sweet all pervading Lord. The cheeky sensual intimacy of the tongue-taste metaphor intensely resonates with the vigour of the *Saguna* bhakti semiotic. It also brings home the paradox contained herewith.

The poet Nanak says that he dissolved himself totally and thereby attained the Lord. By dying to himself he was born to the Lord who demands a complete surrendering – thus Nanak has found liberation from personal desire and overcomes death in order to gain birth in a higher realm where a higher taste enables the poet Nanak to be dead and yet more alive and in bliss than he has ever been. To be partially alive or partially dead is a space in the mystic journey that is rife with suffering and pain. And this is where we intermittently find Fernando Pessoa when not draped in the great peace that surrounds

nature in its pagan non mind's space; we find him struggling to come to terms with the trauma of being half alive / half dead. Pessoa writes:

My heart is a poured-out bucket.

In the same way invokers of spirit invoke spirits, I invoke

My own self and find nothing. ("The Tobacco Shop" p.176)

II

Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935)

On one hand is Nanak's pure celebratory and reforming mysticism and on the other hand we have the tormented genius of a Pessoa, a Lorca or a Baudelaire – social misfits and mystics with hearts stained by the divine light in varying degrees, but corrupted and way laid from the hidden path by the disenchanting impacts of industrialization, urbanization and the general shift that they triggered in humanity from a space of humble faith to the bramble bush of fear, doubt and despair.

Fernando Antonio Nogueira Pessoa was born in Lisbon on 13th June 1888. When scarcely five years old he lost his father and his mother remarried two and a half years later and took Fernando to Durban, South Africa, where his stepfather served as the Portuguese consul. Fernando attended an English school in Durban where he lived with his family till the age of seventeen. He returned to Portugal in 1905 for good and remained there till his death. Like most writers Pessoa seems to have preferred to write about life than to live a life. He was mildly touched by some ills of the chaotic times in which he lived – he smoked and enjoyed drinking, enough to have died at forty seven from sclerosis of the liver. Barring this his was otherwise a clean life spent mostly in the company of his own literary creations and experiments - besides reading, writing, exploring the occult, meditating and observing the self. This in itself must have been a huge achievement

when we consider the fact that Europe in the first half of the 20th century was gripped by the dark cloud of 'interneine warfare, economic depression, ethnic cleansing and racist genocide.' (Konrad Jarausch). The spiritual poverty, the insecurity and the collapse of peace which ailed the general atmosphere in which Pessoa lived is yet another aspect that connects the two mystics at hand. It must be acknowledged however, that the density of the darkness that plagued Pessoa's age was far more insidious, poisoned as it was by the masochistic tendencies of intelligence, advancement and the intellect.

Scholarship confirms that it was Pessoa who translated the esoteric texts of the theosophists into Portuguese; that he possessed a keen knowledge of astrology and was actively involved with automatic writing, the practice of medium-ship and the esoteric occult. All of this added to the philosophical insights and mystic symbolism that underlie his poetry, his conscious distancing from the usual swift sand of issues of human desire, identity and attachment, his creation of alter egos in the form of heteronyms which not only gave him a cloud of anonymity but also involved a certain amount of un-Selfing of the Self – all of these aspects and the reclusive lifestyle he so jealously protected, point towards the fact that he was a modern poet, philosopher and a mystic who defined himself as a 'mystical nationalist'. The following lines in Pessoa's own words convey his nihilism and hermit like tendencies:

Want little: you'll have everything.

Want nothing: you'll be free.

The same love by which we're loved

Oppresses us with it's wanting. (p.133)

Fernando Pessoa is regarded as the greatest poet in the Portuguese language and among the greatest poets of the 20th century. It would not be remiss to say that he lived to write rather than wrote to live. He was a bilingual, and wrote intensely from an early age onwards. He left behind him a lot of unpublished work both in poetry and prose. Only two of his manuscripts were published in his lifetime – *The Book of Disquiet*, published under the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares, and *Mensagem* (Messages), in his own name in 1934 - it is regarded as his greatest work and consists of forty four historical nationalist poems in Portuguese. Other than these most of his poems and prose pieces in English and Portuguese – over 150 of them were published in various journals under different names from his own tribe of heteronyms and orthonyms. When he died of cirrhosis in 1935, he had left 25,000 pages of a lifetime of unpublished, unfinished work.

'Love the nothing and flee the self', that seems to have been Pessoa's philosophy, in Mechtild's⁷ words. Pessoa's engagement with early Christianity and pagan Christian mysticism has often been documented by scholarship. Unlike the hierarchical structure of the Christian church, the pagan⁸ Christian seeks a direct experience of the supreme impersonal oneness underlying all of life in nature. And that is exactly what Pessoa strived for both in life and in his poems - to bring to his readers some comfort and tranquility. He hopes:

And as they read my poems, I hope/ they will think I'm something natural

... [like] 'That old tree, for instance,/ In whose shade when they were children/
They sat down with a thud, tired of playing,/br/>And wiped the sweat from their hot foreheads/
With the sleeve of their striped smocks. (p.47)

Although the poet refrains from any direct reference to it, his poems reaffirm again and again his mystic orientation and his sympathy with the early pastoral Christ. Why else would he write like one who is one with the undulating landscape, the vast peace and as one who has gnosis – is a Gnostic? The Gnostics according to mystic lore were the bearers of a secret mystical wisdom that Jesus had reserved for his closest initiates. They were by contrast, a truly spiritual Christianity concerned with the direct realization of eternal truths. The mystical Gnostics were practising an experiential Christianity in which they sought to become a 'Christ' – one who was enlightened and had become, a realised soul. Here is a short poem of Pessoa's seeped in mystic wisdom of the here and now, and brimming with unlettered humility:

I'd rather be the dust of the road
And trampled on by the feet of the poor...

I'd rather be the rivers that flow
And have washerwomen along the shore...

I'd rather be the poplars next to the river
With only the sky above and the water below...

I'd rather be the miller's donkey
And have him beat me and care for me...

Rather this than to go through life
Always looking back and feeling regret... (p.54)

To simply live and be in the present moment, than to be thinking and fretting in loops of human ego and suffering that is the poet's aspiration. Considering that Pessoa lived in Europe of the pre world war times when the effects of materialism, political unrest, genocide and modernisation had rendered human society and faith into shreds of despair, anguish, darkness and violence; Pessoa's was a remarkable voice. It was a voice that spoke sometimes, like a pagan Christian who saw a spirit, a god in every element of nature's manifest expression. In the poem "Ah, You Believers in Christs and Marys" he says:

Leave me with only the Reality of the moment
And my tranquil and manifest gods who live
Not in the Uncertain
But in the fields and rivers. (p.104)

He writes as though he were conversing, often employing antithesis and paradox to release moments of epiphany, he uses the exploratory mode to dig gently his way to reality as it is thereby pointing to gaps between what we think, feel and what we think we feel. Thinking is often seen as a malaise that masks the real sense of the moment and keeps one away from the reality and bounty of the immediate present. In order to merge with the cosmic sublime in the only way available to the human mind – which is through feeling and an experiential knowing (Immanuel Kant too supports this in his *Critique of Judgement*) Pessoa goes to the extent of disowning himself. For only one can exist in the sacred space of the sublime, the individual ego must dissolve.

In Pessoa's poetry we find the search for emptiness and an "unknowing" which St. Dionysius⁹ describes in his work, *The Dazzling Darkness*: "Leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, that you may arise, through 'unknowing', towards the union with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge" (*World Mysticism* 94). Here was a poet with a strong mystic calling that prompted him towards the cloud of 'unknowing' as he struggled in an atmosphere of doubt and disbelief – a modern malaise, totally at variance with the poet's needs. His life and poetry is proof of his strong mystic leanings, flummoxed sometimes by the bramble bush of doubt and modern thought culture that prompts the tendency to overly rationalize, to doubt the promptings of the inner voice, to depend only on that which can be proven and thought, and thereby live

in a state of constant denial, disillusionment and despair. The following lines from his poem, "The Tobacco Shop" are an example:

I'm nothing.

I'll always be nothing.

I can't want to be something.

But I have in me all the dreams of the world.

.....

Today I'm bewildered, like a man who wondered and discovered and forgot.

Today I'm torn between the loyalty i owe

To the outward reality of the Tobacco Shop across the street

And to the inward reality of my feeling that everything's a dream. (p.173)

His poetry charts the poet's inner journey, his struggle to reconcile the life outside with his deep insight into the reality of things, and the hopelessness of it all. "The Tobacco Shop" gives expression to this life-long enterprise of the poet to make peace with the contradictory laws of the material politic and the regions within. The very fact that Pessoa led a life of solitude and was so unconcerned about the creation of an identity in the publishing world – the very existence of the numerous heteronyms and orthonyms (81 in all have been discovered so far) under which he published his poems and prose pieces – all point to the poet's distance from general human entanglements in the form of relationships, social status and identity. The cultivation of the observing mind, the un-selfing of the self and his efforts to stem all suffering by being in the space of the non

mind (reference, the "Caeiro" poems) is itself a stage in the mystic consciousness and journey. The following poem, "I've Never Kept Sheep" personifies nature as an amorphous macrocosmic being that evolves into an extended metaphor evoking pastoral images of sheep, flock, shepherd, lamb, peace and the poetic muse.

I have no ambitions and no desires.

To be a poet is not my ambition,

It's my way of being alone.

.....

When I sit down to write verses

Or walk along roads and pathways

Jotting verses on a piece of paper in my mind,

I feel a staff in my hand

And see my own profile

On top of a low hill

Looking after my flock and seeing my ideas,

Or looking after my ideas and seeing my flock,

And smiling vaguely, like one who doesn't grasp what was said

But pretends he did. (p.45-46)

The emphasis here is on feeling rather than on thinking, for thinking as the poet says is the root/ route to all sadness attachment and discomfort – it is thinking that removes

one from the fullness of the present, it is thinking that uproots the mind from the moment and the mind is bent on feeding the plant of dismay and dissatisfaction. The images that Pessoa crafts with such delicacy blend in with the mood of the poem:

Like a sound of sheep bells
Beyond the curve in the road
My thoughts are content.
My only regret is that I know they're content
Since if I did not know it they would be content and happy
Instead of sadly content. (p.45)

While he refers obliquely to Christ as Gnostic, shepherd/ poet – himself, in this poem, in yet another poem he denounces Christ and Mary who are portrayed in their righteous Christian image. In a dramatic address to the unseen reader, he appeals to the divine resplendence of nature and the pagan elements that are its godly keepers and “believers more ancient.” He says he would rather turn to nature for spiritual solace and succor than go searching for a Christ or a Mary in other pastures. An excerpt:

Leave me with only the Reality of the moment
And my tranquil and manifest gods who live
Not in the uncertain
But in fields and rivers.

Leave me to this life that paganly passes

.....

Ah, useless suitors of the better-than-life,

Leave life to the believers who are more ancient

Than Christ and his cross

And weeping Mary. (104-105)

III

Fernando Pessoa has often been called a neo-pagan and neo-romantic - closer in his sympathies to late romanticism of the German variety. The Christ, poet and a mystic with a staff shepherding a flock of sheep upon a hillside, and the sound of silence and peace that we find in the green landscape of his writings resonate with the spiritual thought culture of the mystics belonging to the pre Christian era or to the mysticism of early Christianity as it was practiced by the Christian monks, the Rosicrucians and the Gnostics. The routes to the mountain's peak might be several, but the destination of all spiritual systems is the same space of surrender. He that climbs on uphill is the pan mystic - the *nirguna* saint, the hermit Gnostic, pagan simpleton, forest dweller, and the Sufi. And this is where the two merge – Nanak and Pessoa – torch bearers of the mystic order embodied in their persona and work, an impression of their socio-political contexts as well as the semiotics of the cultures and the traditions they were embedded in.

Both lived in the times of violent unrest and political struggles. If Nanak's lifetime was spent in the dark cloud of Babur the pillaging Mughal, Pessoa's adult life passed in the grip of fears of an imminent first world war. The image of Christ the lamb and shepherd finds a parallel in the image of Lord Krishna the cowherd, flute-playing god. Descriptions of nature and the natural terrain in Pessoa and Nanak may vary from gentle undulating hills to the Indian flatland and steep heights of the Himalayas, however, both poets

personify nature in her verdure resplendence as transcendental and as manifest personification of the formless divine in its wordless sublime aspect. To compare a few lines from two poems by the two mystics: First I quote from Pessoa's "Caeiro" poem, "Yesterday Afternoon A Man from the Cities",

What I was thinking about.....

Was how the distant tinkling of sheep bells

As the day began to close

Did... seem like the bells of a tiny chapel

Calling to mass the flowers and the streams

And simple souls like my own. (Tr. Zenith 58)

And the following is a stanza from a composition of Guru Nanak's poem – the "Aarti" that is part of the Sikh scriptures and is read during the evening prayer-service:

A plate-like sky,

The sun and moon its prayer lamps,

The milky-way a string of pearls!

The sandalwood trees are incense sticks

Their fragrance, the breeze fans constantly.

And the verdure wealth of forests makes flower offering.

How beautiful is your prayer service!

Celestial symphonies play within,

O eraser of the life-death ring. (Tr. Myself, *GGS* Vol.8, 2174)

The poetic style and the general semiotic of the two poems may vary, however the tone of reverence is unmistakable, so also their perception of the lush green landscape which they compare to a temple, church or chapel hinged in a continuous state of reverence – a hosanna to the amorphous divine. The tinkling of sheep bells in Pessoa's poem become the bells of a chapel summoning all of nature to come for the evening prayer. In Nanak's "Aarati" poem, all of nature and the cosmos – the flowers, the gentle breeze, the moon and the stars join in to perform the ritual temple prayer, and give expression to the sound of bliss that arises from within the human heart.

The difference in their styles and the depth of mystic perception vary. While Nanak's verse arises from a deeper knowing and celebration of the divine, Pessoa is at a stage where he has grasped the futility of worldly desires and all the needless industry, however, he has yet not stilled completely the pendulum movements of desire and despair within. Both however, appropriate Nature as macrocosm, metaphor and matrix of divine play and spiritual transcendence. This makes for common sharing ground between the two poets who were essentially mystics and modern in orientation, and rebels in their own contexts. In their distinct ways, they both resisted orthodox hierarchical religion, and conservative social norm. While Nanak was a popular saint who was also an integrated family man, Pessoa from his location in the midst of a hubbub

modern city life, set a unique example by remaining a confirmed bachelor and a reclusive mystic all his life. His solitary, bachelor status led him to being a heavy drinker, who was conceptually opposed to sainthood but was in fact (to borrow a concept from Derrida), a deconstructed saint.

I conclude therefore on the premise that although the spiritual status, the mystic semiotic and the isms that Guru Nanak and Fernando Pessoa followed were different, and although they are poets embedded in disparate locations in terms of history, geography and time, the two poets are yoked together by a sympathy of poetic expression that exudes a neo-romantic sensibility, an idea of God as monotheistic and amorphous, and a deep engagement with the mystic divine regions which derive expression in their poetry through a semiotics that is pagan, sublime and transcendental in its drift.

Endnotes

- 1) *Nirguna* Bhakti: Bhakti which began essentially as a *Saguna* tradition incorporating idol and temple worship in its folds at the inception, went on to address another facet of worship which spoke of a god that was essential and formless - without any physical totems or attributes and without any religion. This was the *Nirguna* Bhakti *marga*/ path of which Guru Nanak and Saint Kabir were chief proponents. *Nirguna* Bhakti was also referred to as the Sant tradition. "The Sant tradition was essentially a synthesis of three principle dissenting movements; drawing its features mainly from (a) Vaishnava *Saguna* Bhakti, (b) Shaivism and Hatha yoga based on the Samkhya metaphysics (c) and the Sufis – the spiritual unorthodox face of Islam." (NS 173). From *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India*, 2004, by Neeti Sadarangani.

- 2) Heteronym: A term coined and put into practice by Fernando Pessoa who created several heteronyms. Unlike the pseudonym which an author adopts for reasons of aesthetic sensibility or from a desire for anonymity, the heteronym as Pessoa created it was not just another name that represented the poet. It possessed a distinct biography, temperament, philosophy, appearance and writing style as well. Of the 81 heteronyms created by Pessoa, three heteronyms were central to his writings. They were, Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis & Alvaro de Campos. "Introduction", *Selected Poems: Fernando Pessoa & Co.* Edited and Translated by Richard Zenith.

3) Nanak's Poetic Oeuvre: Five long poems and several short poetic compositions (over 900): The *Japji*, composed by the poet when he was in a state of deep spiritual inebriation, is a theological composition. It is a summation of Nanak's spiritual vision – his insights into the *Niraakaar*, the cosmos that is His Creation, and the laws that determine and sustain its business. The *Dakhni Omkar* and the *Siddha Goshti* on the same lines enter into theological debate as they critically expose the futility of ritual and the corruption of intent that has seeped into the folds of Brahmin community and the yogic orders of the Siddhas and the Nath yogis. Over and above these are the shorter poems written in the form of *Vars* – ballads of love and war, the *Prabhatis* - hymns composed to be sung in the morning, the *Allahnian* which are closer to the English elegy and the *Ghorian* – lyrics that are usually sung during celebrations and weddings. Other short forms include, the *Sodar* (doorstep/ threshold poems), *Wanjare* (poems of the gypsies and vagabonds), the *Pahare* and *Birhaarasa* - poems inspired by ordinary life and poems of lament respectively. *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India*, 2004, by Neeti Sadarangani.

4) *Saguna* Bhakti: The term *Saguna* means that which is equipped with physical and material attributes. The gods at the helm of the *Saguna* bhakti were the two major gods of the Indian pantheon – 1) Lord Vishnu/ Krishna, 2) Lord Shiva/ Mahadev. And thus there were two streams to *Saguna* Bhakti – Vaishnav bhakti and Shaiva bhakti – alternately known as Vaishnavism and Shaivism. While Vishnu as Lord Krishna is the prince in hiding, flute playing cowherd charmer and god, Shiva is the great young sage

in the Himalayas, seeped in deep penance, chaste and powerful – an Adi-yogi, husband of Sati/ Durga and one who has mastered the elements of esoteric knowledge. Both the gods formed the two schools of *Saguna* bhakti. Taken from *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India*, 2004, by Neeti Sadarangani.

- 5) Punjabi: The language spoken by the natives of Punjab – a variation of the old apabrahmsa dialect. Nanak is the first major poet of Punjabi literature. He is also known as the father of Punjabi poetry. The Punjabi script (the Gurmukhi) was formalised by Guru Nanak.
- 6) Sufi Dervesh: A dervish or darvesh (Persian and Arabic) is someone who guides a Sufi Muslim ascetic down the mystic path called "Tariqah". It is known for courting extreme poverty and austerity.
- 7) Mechtild of Magdeburg, was a thirteenth century German Christian seer and poetess, who defines the mystic as one who empties him/ her-self of his sense of self, and so becomes nothing that can contain everything. Following the example of Jesus of Nazareth, who was a penniless itinerant teacher, Christian mystics have sought to transcend the personal self through the cultivation of a 'devout humility.' 'Christian mystics have often been hermits living a simple, reclusive life of prayer and prayer in its highest stages is but a silent meditation and communion with the divine. In the words of Meister Eckhart (a Christian mystic), "the inward man is not at all in time or place, but

purely and simply in eternity." "Spiritual knowledge is available to the mystic in proportion to his freedom from self-importance and limited personal preoccupations which bind him to his separate self." (91) *The Complete Guide to World Mysticism*. Eds. Freke & Gandy.

8) Paganism represents a wide variety of traditions that emphasize reverence for nature and a revival of ancient polytheistic and animistic religious practices. Some modern forms of Paganism have their roots in 19th century C.E. European nationalism (including the British Order of Druids), but most contemporary Pagan groups trace their immediate organizational roots to the 1960s, and have an emphasis on archetypal psychology and a spiritual interest in nature. Paganism is not a traditional religion *per se* because it does not have any official doctrine, but it does have some common characteristics joining the great variety of traditions. One of the common beliefs is the divine presence in nature and the reverence of the natural order in life. Spiritual growth is related to the cycles of the Earth and great emphasis is placed on ecological concerns. Monotheism is almost universally rejected within Paganism and most Pagan traditions are particularly interested in the revival of ancient polytheist religious traditions including the Norse (northern Europe) and Celtic (Britain) traditions. *Wikipedia*

9) St. Dionysius was a contemporary of St. Paul (author of the New Testament), and his works are treated by Christian mystics with the same veneration as the biblical writings. Dionysius's writings are a subtle marriage of Mystery School mysticism and Christianity. *The Complete Guide to World Mysticism*. Eds. Freke & Gandy

10) According to Dr Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, Head of the Department of Development Studies at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad, the Udasi Panth priests preached the Sikh doctrine which in turn led to the Nanakpanth sect which is a blend of Hindu and Sikh religions... In the last 10 to 15 years, new Gurdwara Sahibs have been built in every district and major towns of North Sindh, Pakistan. These Gurdwara Sahibs are run by Nanakpanthi Hindus. The congregation and Keertaniyas and Granthi are all Nanakpanthis and they celebrate with great fervor, the birthday's of each of the ten Sikh Gurus. (Taken from "Sindhi Hindus & Nanakpanthis in Pakistan," by Inderjeet Singh. Abstracts of Sikh Studies, Vol XIX, Issue 4. p. 38-39.)

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